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ABSTRACT

Although traditional composition instruction has moved from an emphasis on skill practice for writing in other disciplines to an emphasis on writing as a personal communication process, the increasing demands for clear technical writing and the current attacks on jargon require that English departments further define and outline composition courses that stress personal written expression in clear, concise language. For an effective composition program that is respected as separate by other disciplines, the following are prerequisites: a professional writing teacher heads the program; a newsletter permits necessary communication with the other disciplines and serves as a teaching device; substantiated ideas provide the basis for the initial instruction; individualized instruction utilizes clear and simple prewriting and writing activities; and composition exercises are separate from all technical writing for other courses. (MAT)

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Writing and Other Disciplines: Reaching Reluctant Learners

A phenomenon which has resulted in part from the "writing crisis," illusion or reality that it may be, is the proliferation of programs based on the principle that all faculty members are responsible for teaching writing, or, at least, for reinforcing those skills which student writers already possess, whether they have learned them in composition courses or not. From the University of Oregon to Ithaca College, and, most recently, at Beaver College under a $200,000 NEH grant, writing--and reading, but that is another paper--across the curriculum has become the latest fad.

It's an idea which has been around a long time. Jacques Barzun mentioned it in Teacher in America, 1945, and it was not new then. But that was over thirty years ago, and for most of those years, very few serious attempts to deal with the implications of that idea were made. In his remarks before the plenary session of the MLA Teaching of Writing Division in Chicago last December (printed in the WPA Newsletter), Ken Bruffee talked about some recent attempts. In these programs,

CS204590

he said, "writing is no longer perceived as the exclusive province, responsibility, and tough luck of the English Department. Writing is being perceived as the active concern of the whole college." To substantiate his observation, he described his visit as a CEA Campus Consultant to a medium-sized private college in the midwest. During his one day visit, he talked at length with the Director of Freshman English, but also with other administrators, faculty members, department chairs, and students. Everyone, it seems, was getting into the act.

One of the reasons for this move out of English Departments is that teachers of writing have finally articulated what they have known all along, but especially since Albert Kitzhaber's Themes, Theories, and Therapies: We can't do it all. Doing it all was what we tried twenty or thirty years ago, when Freshman comp was a course designed to serve the needs of students but also, and perhaps more importantly, the needs of instructors in other disciplines. The comp course was supposed to whip the students' writing into shape so that teachers in other disciplines wouldn't have to bother with it. The faculty in those other disciplines assured us that they would take care of content.

Composition was, that is, perceived as a skills course which would enable students to write more correct papers for history, or economics, or sociology, or religious studies. During that era, it was not unusual to be confronted by an instructor of, say, philosophy, who would say: "This student took composition. How come he writes like this?" We didn't

want to exacerbate the situation, so we didn't inform the instructor that that student couldn't construct a philosophical inquiry, either. We simply didn't have a real answer.

But as writing teachers looked to what they were doing, as they began to think of composition as a process, and as they encouraged students to write about what they knew best, namely, themselves, the traditional course changed, imperceptibly at first, but fundamentally. Many of us discovered that students not only wrote better in such courses, but they wrote honestly and even movingly. Even now, after reading student papers, I wonder why we would ever have done anything else. I just read a piece of writing, done as an exercise in illustration, in which the student writer describes in concrete and significant detail the children's orthopedics ward of a local hospital, the gear and tackle and trim of traction and treatment, and a couple of the children she met when she worked there as a volunteer. She ended with a comment about the children's endurance and concern for one another, in which "they showed a maturity exceptional for their years." Where else could that student have written about that experience? Where else would anyone have valued her perceptions? Would a formal study of the behavior of children in hospital situations have been a better exercise for her--something like "Therapeutic Techniques and Interactive Behavior in Subjects under Medical Stress" for example? I think not.

In any case, the composition course had moved out of the service category and into something else--no one was quite sure what else, at first. But looking back at it now, those first reactions were the beginnings of our perceptions of writing as what Janet Emig calls not only a mode of learning, but learning itself. And it has taken us a great deal of time and effort to be able to describe the comp course as a course in composing and not in writing history papers. But it was also true that many of our students, though they wrote well in comp courses, could not perform the more objective tasks set for them by other disciplines. Those who were able to analyze their own experiences could not analyze the relationships between economic and political systems, for instance. And we were still confronted by faculty members who said: "This student took composition. How come he writes like this?" Now, we thought, at least we had an answer, because writing history was not our objective. But that answer was not well-received, partly because we hadn't bothered to tell very many of our colleagues what we were doing. As things turned out, that may have been an unconsciously wise move, since the "writing crisis" was waiting in the wings as a reprieve.

The writing crisis made us go public, and when we did, for all the misrepresentations, the misquotations, the misalliances, even, we could not only make our case for composition, but also stress the faculty's co-responsibility. I support that generous move. I have no territorial imperative. But I am much concerned about the kind of writing

which these attempts will engender, and I am much opposed to making writing a service course again, even under a different sponsorship.

We have all heard and read a great deal of and about double-speak, bureaucratic prose (notice that no one writes bureaucratic poetry), the jargon which obfuscates. We take arms against this sea of rubble, give annual awards to the most flagrant examples of language abuse. But this public posture should not belie our private acts. We should not, at the same time that we are criticizing Daniel Moynihan's academic prose, compromise with the local academics about writing in their disciplines. We should not be willing to teach a technical writing which a computer might better simulate.

I want to make it clear that literary studies are not immune from these caveats. Wimsatt's prose or almost anything in PMLA before the recent past should not be immune. Take this passage from a recent work (Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: Poems of our Climate): "Whitman's stance is very much the fourth and final stance recommended by Hermagoras: metalepsis, which translates the orator's own belated mess into a perpetual earliness. In the patterns of Romantic imagery, Wordsworthian or Emersonian, this is the ultimate version of a stance of pathos, of potential power, of Emersonian surprise or the vital will achieving a victory over every limitation and particularly over the final antagonist, which is not death but time and time's 'it was,' to use Nietzsche's formulation." How much unreadable writing

have those in this room read in pursuing research? How much, too, without substance? How many articles could we summarize in one thoughtful sentence and not lose anything?

Recently I received in the mail a copy of Who's Who in Modern Literature by Martin Seymour-Smith. It looks like any other paperback reference work, the entries listed alphabetically. When I looked in the book to check on some favorite authors, I expected to find the usual aloof write-ups, non-committal, with negative comments carefully balanced with positive ones. You know, the encyclopedia style. Well, I was surprised instead to find that the text had been written by a human being. Some examples:

> On Sinclair Lewis: "The notion that Lewis is in any sense important as a writer should be resisted."
>
> On Denise Levertov: "American poet born in the horrible suburb of Ilford, Essex, England..."
>
> On Vachel Lindsay (reared in a teetotaling family): "That in 1931 he chose the method of drinking poison to end it all is perhaps of interest to students of the evangelical 'temperance' mentality."
>
> On F.R. Leavis: "For an educator his range of interest is absurdly (this is not too strong a word) narrow...His criticism of fiction...owed much to his wife, Q.D. Leavis, who wrote the important Fiction and the Reading Public."

The writer's persona is accessible in this kind of writing. He is not a disembodied writing machine, and what he produces has a voice that communicates clearly, sometimes memorably. An English instructor I know went home to read this book from cover to cover. I must say that, in the midst of a busy semester, I have

read over half of it, and I can't say I have ever done that with another reference work of any kind.

Writing in all disciplines faces the problem of technical jargon. Dr. Franz Ingelfinger, Editor of the New England Journal of Medicine, says, "Language, like patients, has been affected by the disease of medical progress. Today if a medical writer is to present relatively new material, he unavoidably has to use language made huge, unsightly, and lumpy by words devised to express new methods, new entities, and new ideas." Some years ago, however, Ingelfinger asked Barbara Culliton, a respected science journalist, to rewrite a densely written technical paper, just to show it could be done. He then published both versions. It was Ingelfinger, too, who recruited Lewis Thomas, president of the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Institute, to be the regular essayist for the Journal. The columns he wrote under the title "Notes of a Biology-watcher" were collected into the volume called The Lives of a Cell, which won a National Book Award. Ingelfinger also published Michael Crichton's accusation that medical obfuscation is deliberate, that it is used by the profession to admit some persons and to exclude others, that it springs, then, from socio-political motives.

Even legal and bureaucratic writing are under attack. In Massachusetts, insurance companies may be required by law to write policies in clear language. President Carter recently signed an executive order requiring the same of government writers. Intent, of course, is not synonymous with accomplish-

ment, but the fact that consciousness at such high levels has been raised is encouraging. One does wonder how those who have been writing government documents will be able to gear up for the new clarity, a change which seems almost too painful to contemplate.

William Safire once tch-tched at the academic community for criticizing governmental prose. "Who," he asked, "took a chubby little boy named Ronny Ziegler, bombarded him with computer terminology at a tender age...until, years later, 'inoperative' sprang unbidden to his lips?' Academics, that's who. That's why I am especially interested in our attempts to reach those often reluctant learners from other disciplines, including those who teach English and American literature. I see the acceptance of such programs as a real chance to turn things around, to effect a revolution, if you will, in the perception and writing of academic prose, and I would expect such programs to affect faculty members as well as their students. I expect us not to be reserved about our commitment to creativity, to writing as learning itself. In our efforts to alter the focus of faculty members from product to process, we must be careful not to compromise on the quality of the product, not to accept inaccessible writing even if the proper steps have ostensibly been taken to achieve it.

As a teacher of writing, I am constantly faced with that dilemma. A student I have now writes well. He knows how to state a thesis, how to develop and support it logically, and

how to use the language and jargon of his major field: politics. But he does not write in his own voice, and his writing is dull and uninteresting, although it sounds learned. The class as audience told him as much: Good ideas, they said, but not very interesting. What really scored with him, however, was the work of other members of the class, work which was equally perceptive, but more interesting and marked by a passion for ideas. Although I had commented favorably on his strong sense of thesis and organization, he himself discovered that his writing suffered from the "blahs." He insists that he has been taught and encouraged to write the way he does, to adopt a pseudo-objective style which enables him to handle ideas as if they had no relationship to himself at all.

What does a writing teacher do in that situation, in which she finds herself between student and colleague? I remember that when James Britton and his team pursued the project which required them to study writing among schoolchildren in England, one of their conclusions was that they had expected to change teachers' views of language, but instead found that they had been engaged in changing their views of learning. And Nancy Martin, et al's analysis which draws on Britton's work is called Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum 11-16.

When we are working with our own institutional colleagues, this task can be less than rewarding. Not only will we disagree with them on what is good writing, but we will want to question concepts of learning. Both may be perceived as

threatening, but they must be pursued because we can all learn much from this process, especially if we remember that reluctance to learn is more often a characteristic of personality than it is of intelligence.

Some of the responses we should be prepared for, for instance, include:

1. That's the English Department's job. Writing is a skill; you take care of the writing, and I'll take care of the content.
2. Grammar is the main problem. I even mark all the grammatical errors, so I've done my job, but the writing still doesn't improve. If they can't do the work, they shouldn't be here.
3. I've got a syllabus to cover, and that approach will take too much time away from it. (Tyranny of the syllabus fallacy.)
4. You don't have to write yourself to recognize good writing when you see it.
5. This is the way I learned to write, and it worked for me.
6. I've been giving these assignments for years, and students used to be able to do them.
7. Whaddya mean Blank's unreadable? He's published more than you have.
8. We're already doing all that.

I'm sure everyone here could add more to that list. How do those committed to writing and learning across the curriculum deal with reluctant learners? How do we encourage our colleagues to alter behavior in the students' best interest? By being teachers ourselves.

The first and most important requirement is that the writing program should be in the hands of someone who knows what he or she is doing, who is active professionally, and who has the

respect of the faculty. This person should be a true writing teacher, a Renaissance person who knows or is willing to learn about other disciplines. The Director of Writing might put out a faculty newsletter which will serve as a means of communication with all the faculty as well as a teaching device. He or she should establish small and informal ways of talking with faculty members about writing, even stacking these sessions with people who have some insight into the problems. Reports on the results of these sessions in the newsletter may get faculty who do not agree with the consensus of those present at a session to attend the next one, and these are the people we most want to reach.

We should begin our attempts slowly and with substantiated ideas. Respect for research may be on our side here, but we must not be dogmatic or require instant acquiescence. If a faculty member is making a change which, although an improvement, is not ideal, we should praise the alteration and encourage him/her to move ahead.

We should devise clear and simple suggestions--some prewriting techniques, for example--and not hesitate to call on other faculty members to reinforce the validity of our claims. If we reach a few people who respond positively, an idea may spread on its own. Most of this kind of thing depends on individualized instruction, anyway, and some will move ahead more rapidly than others.

Most academics will be more than willing to admit to the density of academic prose, and for various motivations,

but this is a place to start. Some may not see the mote in their own eye, of course, but there is often no need to insist on this since that is often a private revelation. Above all, we should not ask, as students have been forced to ask, "What do you want?"

Any attempt to associate such activities with service should be resisted. They belong, instead, under the rubric of interdisciplinary activities. By maintaining the status of our discipline, we may be able to improve the readibility of our own and our students' writing. We may also be involved in the creation of a new elite: those who write clearly about complex ideas. Such an "elite" can make academia less mysterious and more accessible to the reading public.

Now is our chance; let's not blow it.